

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000238

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

FOR EAP/PD (KOVACH), EAP/BCLTV (GLAZEROFF), ECA/A/E/EAP
(HANLON), DRL/PHD (GERAN)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KISL KPAO BM

SUBJECT: AMERICAN CENTER SPEAKER PROMOTES DIALOGUE ON
NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

11. (SBU) Summary: Embassy Rangoon's Public Affairs Section hosted Fulbright Scholar Jeffrey Kamakahi for programs on diversity, inequality, and social change with Burma's many ethnic, racial, and religious groups. Though the target audiences greatly appreciated his visit, they also expressed their continued distrust of the ruling SPDC (particularly with regard to the seven point "road map to democracy") and the Burman/Buddhist majority. Despite common calls for NLD-SPDC-ethnic group dialogue and demands for federalism, the ethnic groups' internal divisions prevent a unified approach to the SPDC. The Muslim community, marginalized and oppressed by the SPDC and having no natural minority ethnic affiliation, feels particularly powerless. End Summary.

Diversity and the Need to Look to the Future

12. (U) From February 8-14, Professor Jeffrey Kamakahi, a professor of sociology from St. John's University in Minnesota, and current Fulbright Scholar at Sendai University in Japan, visited Burma (with Regional Fulbright funding support) to give presentations on diversity, inequality, and social change to a variety of ethnic, racial, and religious groups. As a reflection of the value Americans place in a diverse society, the program's objective was to help our target audiences view diversity positively and find mechanisms to constructively address inequality.

13. (U) The programs were directed at both cross-ethnic political groups, such as the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) and the Ethnic Nationality Mediators' Fellowship (ENMF), and mono-ethnic organizations, such as the Karen Development Committee (KDC) and the Shan Language and Literacy Association. In addition, the Professor met with religious-based groups and individuals, such as the faculty and students of the Myanmar Institute of Theology, the recently retired Catholic archbishop of Rangoon, an interfaith group organized by the Mandalay YMCA, and Muslim Community religious and social leaders, as well as a student group from a prominent Islamic Center.

14. (U) In his presentations, Professor Kamakahi stressed the importance of looking to the future to establish a sense of "identity" as a basis for increasing solidarity within a society, rather than clinging solely to traditional ideas of race and ethnicity that often divide communities. He contended that ethnic and religious majorities are not as monolithic as they seem and can often find common cause with minority groups. He also emphasized, however, that the majority often gets its way and that those with power try to keep it.

"Second-class Citizens" Mistrust Government But Lack Unity

15. (SBU) All the groups with whom Professor Kamakahi met are attempting to address ethnic/religious identity issues both in the general sense of coexisting equitably and peacefully with a Burman-Buddhist majority, and in the specific sense of determining how to defend their ethnic/religious interests in the context of the SPDC's seven-point road map to democracy. The road map includes convening a national constitutional convention and holding a referendum on the new constitution to be followed by parliamentary elections to form a new government. The SPDC has been conducting bilateral negotiations with a number of ethnic groups to participate in the constitutional convention. In that context, all groups expressed gratitude to Professor Kamakahi for provoking discussion and providing intellectual tools to address diversity issues.

16. (SBU) Professor Kamakahi's program also revealed a unanimity among groups that ethnic and religious minorities are treated as "second class citizens" even in the areas in which they constitute a majority and that the SPDC (with its policies of "divide and rule" and "Burmanization") could not be trusted. Most also called for a "tripartite" dialogue among the SPDC, NLD, and the ethnic groups.

17. (SBU) In many instances, the mistrust of the SPDC extended to the Burman/Buddhist majority as well. A UNA participant explained: "I hate Burman authority, not Burman people," though he added that the SPDC was a "master race" government. A Shan interlocutor commented that while he had no problem trusting other ethnic groups, he could not trust ethnic Burmans. Similar sentiment was expressed in meetings with other ethnic and religious groups. In fact, none of the ethnic groups have built significant alliances with the members of the Burman-Buddhist majority. (Ironically, in Mandalay, ethnic Burman Buddhists who expressed sympathy for the plight of non-Buddhists, had nothing but mistrust for the burgeoning Chinese community there.)

18. (SBU) Ethnic groups' common consensus disintegrates over a number of issues, including what actions should be taken in light of the SPDC road map. As much as the ENMF (which is working with ethnic cease-fire groups) supports the national constitutional convention envisioned by the SPDC (under certain conditions), the UNA opposes it, and both believe they represent the best interests of their own ethnic groups. Perhaps revealing his own ideas on diversity, one UNA representative likened an SPDC invitation to the constitutional convention to "inviting a Muslim to eat pork." The ENMF's more positive posture towards the road map has drawn criticism for its leader, Reverend Saboi Jum. Retired Catholic Bishop Gabriel, himself a Karen, accused Saboi Jum of being an opportunist, personally profiting financially from cease-fire negotiations.

19. (SBU) Another factor contributing to ethnic disunity was the perception of each group's importance vis--vis the other groups. For example, because of the KNU's support of Burmese exile groups on the Thai border and the Karen minority's wide geographic distribution within Burma, the Karen community believes it is a leader among ethnic groups. Commenting about participation in the national convention, a Karen business leader said: "If we go in, the rest (of the ethnic groups) will follow." Similarly, the Shan community still feels an acute historical grievance: they believe that the Union of Burma only exists because of the Shan nationality's agreement to join in 1948.

Muslims Feel Powerless and Unrepresented

10. (SBU) Having emphasized their Burman identity in the past, the Muslim community feels particularly helpless in the face of SPDC oppression. For example, SPDC authorities insist on identifying Muslims as "mixed race," a negative attribute in the SPDC's "pure Burman" race construct. Muslim leaders have supported the NLD in the past, but they do not feel the NLD's support in return. And because they have no natural ethnic affiliation (as some of the Christian denominations do), Muslim interests are not even voiced (let alone represented) in the current political environment. The Muslims reserved particular disappointment for the Indian, Malaysian, and Indonesian governments for their indifference to the plight of Burmese Muslims.

11. (SBU) In that context, the Muslim leaders appreciated Professor Kamakahi's message of seeking commonality with other groups in order to forge a future-oriented identity. Commenting on the Professor's lecture to a student group from a prominent local Islamic Center (the first such Embassy event with this group), a Muslim leader said: "You've said the right thing."

12. (SBU) Comment: Professor Kamakahi commented that most of the groups seemed to be at the "pluralism" phase of diversity, with each group defining itself by its past and negotiating with other groups for its own parochial interests. However, given the enthusiasm that greeted this program, perhaps ethnic and religious groups will begin to explore points of commonality among groups in Burmese society (including the Burman/Buddhist majority) that will help address constructively their historical grievances and current political aspirations. End comment. MARTINEZ